CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO. The Second Anniversary

Unpacking

SATURDAY 15 JULY 2006

North London and Edinburgh

At six-fifteen that evening he pulls down the metal shutters of the Belleville Café and snaps the heavy padlock into place. Nearby Maddy waits for him, and he takes her hand as they walk together towards the tube station.

Finally, finally he has moved house, recently taking possession of a pleasant but unshowy three-bedroomed maisonette in Gospel Oak. Maddy lives in Stockwell, some distance away at the other end of the Northern Line, and sometimes it makes sense for her to stay over. But not tonight; there has been no melodrama or portentousness about it, but tonight he would like to have some time by himself. He has set himself a task tonight, and he can only do it alone.

They say goodbye outside Tufnell Park tube. Maddy is a little taller than him, with long straight black hair, and she has to stoop a little to kiss him goodbye. ‘Call me later, if you want.’

‘I might do.’

‘And if you change your mind, and you want me to come up—’

‘I’ll be fine.’

‘Alright then. See you tomorrow maybe?’

‘I’ll call you.’

They kiss goodnight again, briefly but fondly, and he carries on walking down the hill towards his new home.

He has been seeing Maddy, the café’s manager, for two months now. They have yet to tell the other staff officially, but suspect they probably know already. It has not been a passionate affair, more a gradual acceptance over the last year of an inevitable situation. To Dexter, it has all been a little too practical and matter-of-fact, and he is privately a little uncomfortable about the transition that Maddy has made from confidante to lover; it casts a shadow over the relationship, that it should have originated in such gloom.

But it’s true they get on very well, everyone says so, and Maddy is kind and sensible and attractive, long and slim, and a little awkward. She has ambitions to be a painter, and Dexter thinks she is good; small canvases hang in the café, and are sold occasionally. She is also ten years younger than he is — he imagines Emma rolling her eyes at this — but she is wise and smart and has been through her own share of unhappiness: an early divorce, various unhappy relationships. She is quiet, self-contained and thoughtful and has a melancholy air about her, which suits him at present. She is also compassionate and fiercely loyal; it was Maddy who saved the business during the time when he was drinking the profits and not turning up, and he is grateful to her for this. Jasmine likes her. They

get on well enough, for the moment at least.

It's a pleasant Saturday evening and he walks on alone through residential back streets until he reaches the flat, the basement and ground floor of a red-brick mansion block not too far from Hampstead Heath. The flat retains the smell and the wallpaper of the elderly couple who lived there before, and he has only unpacked a few essentials: the TV and DVD, the stereo. It's a frumpy kind of place, at the moment anyway, with its dado rails and appalling bathroom and its many other small rooms, but Sylvie insists that it has great potential, once they've knocked the walls through and sanded the floors. There's a great room for when Jasmine comes to stay, and a garden too. A garden. For a while he joked about paving it over, but has now decided that he is going to learn to garden, and has bought a book on the subject. Somewhere deep in his consciousness he has become aware of the concept of the shed. Soon, it will be golf and pyjamas in bed.

Once inside and past the boxes that clutter the hall, he takes a shower then goes into the kitchen and orders Thai food to be delivered. In the living room he lies on the sofa and begins to compile a mental list of the things he must do before he can begin his task.

For a small, diverse circle of people, a previously innocuous date has taken on a melancholy weight, and there are certain calls that must now be made. He starts with Sue and Jim, Emma's parents in Leeds. The conversation is pleasant and straightforward enough and he tells them about the business, how Jasmine is getting on

at school, repeating the conversation twice for both the mother and the father. ‘Well, that’s all the news really,’ he tells Sue. ‘Just to say, you know, thinking of you today, and hope you’re alright.’

‘You too, Dexter. Look after yourself, won’t you?’ she says, her voice unsteady, then hangs up. Dexter continues to work through the list, speaking to his sister, his father, his ex-wife, his daughter. The conversations are brief, ostentatiously lighthearted and don’t mention the significance of the day, but the subtext is always the same: ‘I’m fine.’ He phones Tilly Killick, but she is mawkish and over-emotional: ‘But how are you *really* sweetheart? I mean, *really*? Are you by yourself? Are you *okay* by yourself? Do you want us to come over?’ Irritated, he reassures her, then ends the call as quickly and politely as he can. He calls Ian Whitehead in Taunton, but he’s putting the kids to bed, the little sods, and it’s not a good time. Ian promises he’ll call back in the week and maybe even come down and see him sometime, and Dexter says that it’s a great idea in full know ledge that it will never happen. There’s a general sense, as in all the calls, that the worst of the storm has passed. Dexter will probably never speak to Ian Whitehead again and this is fine too, for both of them.

He eats supper with the television on, hopping channels and restricting himself to the solitary beer that came free with the delivery. But there’s something saddening about eating alone, hunched over on the sofa in this strange house and for the first time that day he feels a rush of despair and loneliness. These days grief seems like

walking on a frozen river; most of the time he feels safe enough, but there is always that danger that he will plunge through. Now he hears the ice creak beneath him, and so intense and panicking is the sensation that he has to stand for a moment, press his hands to his face and catch his breath. He exhales slowly through his fingers, then rushes into the kitchen and throws dirty plates into the sink with a clatter. He has a sudden overwhelming need to drink, and to keep on drinking. He finds his phone.

'What's up?' says Maddy, concern in her voice.

'Just a little panic that's all.'

'Are you sure you don't want me to come up?'

'I'm fine now.'

'I can get a taxi? I can be with you in—'

'No, really. I'd rather be alone.' He finds that the sound of her voice is enough to calm him, and he reassures her once more then says goodnight. When he is sure that there is no conceivable reason for anyone to call him back, he turns the phone off, draws the blinds, goes upstairs and begins.

The spare bedroom contains nothing but a mattress, an open suitcase and seven or eight cardboard boxes, two of which are labelled 'Emma 1' and 'Emma 2' in her own handwriting in thick black marker pen. The last of Emma's possessions from his flat, the boxes contain notebooks, letters, wallets of photographs, and he carries them down to the living room and spends the rest of the evening unpacking them, sorting the meaningless ephemera — ancient bank statements, receipts, old take-away menus,

all of which he stuffs into a black bin-liner — from the stuff he will send to her parents, and the items he would like to keep for himself.

The process takes some time, but is carried out in an entirely dry-eyed, pragmatic way, and he stops only occasionally. He avoids reading the journals and notebooks with their scraps of youthful poetry and plays. It seems unfair — he imagines Emma wincing over his shoulder or scrambling to knock them from his hand — and instead he concentrates on the letters and photographs.

The way the material has been packed means that he works through it in reverse chronological order, digging back through the strata, starting with their years together as a couple, back through the Nineties and eventually, at the bottom of box 2, into the Eighties. First there are dummy covers from the 'Julie Criscoll' novels, correspondence with her editor Marsha, press cuttings. The next layer reveals postcards and photos of Paris, including a snap of the famous Jean-Pierre Dusollier, dark-skinned and very handsome, the one that got away. In an envelope with Metro tickets, folded menus, a rental agreement in French, he stumbles on something that's so startling and affecting that he almost drops it on the floor.

It's a Polaroid, taken in Paris during that summer, of Emma lying naked on a bed, legs crossed at the ankle, her arms stretched languidly above her head. The photo was taken on a drunken, amorous evening after watching *Titanic* in French on a black and white TV, and even though he found the photograph beautiful, she had snatched it from

him and insisted that she would destroy it. The fact that she kept the Polaroid and secreted it away should please him, suggesting as it does that Emma liked the photo more than she let on. But it also slams him up against her absence once more, and he has to take a moment to catch his breath. He places the Polaroid back in the envelope and sits in silence to gather himself. The ice creaks beneath him.

He continues. From the late Nineties he finds an assortment of birth announcements, wedding invitations and orders of service, an over-sized farewell card from the staff and pupils of Cromwell Road Comprehensive School and, stuffed in the same envelope, a series of letters from someone called Phil which are so sexually fixated and pleading that he quickly folds them up and stuffs them back into the envelope. There are flyers from Ian's comedy-improv nights and some tedious paperwork from solicitors concerning the purchase of the flat in E17. He finds a selection of witless picture postcards that he sent while travelling in the early Nineties — 'Amsterdam is MAD', 'Dublin ROCKS'. He is reminded of the letters he got in return, wonderful little packets of pale blue air-mail paper that he re-reads occasionally, and is embarrassed afresh by his callow twenty-four-year-old self: 'VENICE COMPLETELY FLOODED!!!!'. There's a copy of the photostat programme of 'Cruel Cargo — a play for young people by Emma Morley and Gary Cheadle' and then old essays, dissertations on 'Donne's Women' and 'Eliot and Fascism', a pile of postcard reproductions marked with the

tiny holes from the pin-boards of student houses. He finds a cardboard tube and in it, rolled up tight, Emma's graduation certificate, untouched, he imagines, for nearly twenty years. He verifies this by looking at the date — 14 July 1988. Eighteen years ago yesterday.

In a torn paper wallet he finds the graduation photographs and flicks through them without any great nostalgia. Because the photos were taken by Emma herself she barely features in them, and he has forgotten many of the other students anyway; she was part of a different crowd in those days. Still, he is struck by the youth of the faces and also by the fact that Tilly Killick has the power to annoy him, even in a photo at a distance of nineteen years. A snap of Callum O'Neill, skinny and self-satisfied, is swiftly torn in two and plunged deep into the bin-bag.

But at some point she must have handed the camera to Tilly, because there is finally a sequence of Emma by herself, pulling mock-heroic faces in mortar board and gown, her spectacles perched bookishly on the end of her nose. He smiles, then gives a groan of amused shame as he finds a photo of his old self.

He is pulling an absurd male model's face, sucking in his cheekbones and pouting while Emma wraps one arm around his neck, her face close to his, eyes wide, one hand pressed to her cheek as if star-struck. After this photo was taken they had gone to the graduation tea-party, the pub and then to the party at that house. He can't remember who lived there, only that the house was packed and virtually

destroyed, the party spilling out onto the street and the back garden. Hiding from the chaos, they had found a spot on a sofa in the living room together and stayed rooted there all evening. This was where he had kissed her for the first time. He examines the graduation photo once again, Emma behind thick black frames, her hair a bottle red and badly cut, a little plumper in the face than he remembers her now, mouth split in a wide smile, her cheek pressed to his. He puts the photo to one side, and looks at the next.

It is the morning after. They are sitting together on a mountainside, Emma in 501s cinched at the waist and black Converse All-Stars, Dexter a little way off in the white shirt and black suit that he had worn the day before.

The summit of Arthur's Seat was disappointingly crowded with tourists and other graduating students, all whey-faced and shaky from last night's celebrations. Dex and Em raised their hands sheepishly in greeting to a few acquaintances, but tried to keep their distance, keen to avoid gossip even now that it was too late.

They wandered idly around the scrappy rust-coloured plateau, taking in the view from all angles. Standing at the stone column that marked the summit, they made the remarks they were obliged to make in such situations: how far they had walked and how they could see their house from here. The column itself had been scratched with graffiti: private jokes, 'DG Was Here', 'Scotland Forever', 'Thatcher Out'.

'We should carve our initials,' suggested Dexter, weakly.

‘What, “Dex 4 Em”?’

‘4 Ever.’

Emma sniffed doubtfully and examined the most striking graffiti, a large penis drawn with indelible green ink. ‘Imagine climbing all this way just to draw that. Did he bring the pen with him, d’you think? “It’s a lovely view, natural beauty and all that, but what this spot really needs is a massive cock and balls.”’

Dexter laughed mechanically, but once again, self-consciousness was starting to creep in; now they were here it felt like a mistake, and independently they wondered if they should skip the picnic and simply clamber back down and head home. But neither of them was quite prepared to suggest this, and instead they found a hollow a short way from the summit where the rocks seemed to provide some natural furniture, and they settled here and unpacked the rucksack.

Dexter popped the champagne, which was warm now and foamed forlornly over his hand and onto the heather. They took it in turns to swig but there was little sense of celebration and after a brief silence Emma resorted once more to remarking on the view. ‘Very nice.’

‘Hm.’

‘No sign of rain!’

‘Hm?’

‘St Swithin’s Day, you said it was. “If on Swithin’s Day it do rain. .”’

‘Absolutely. No sign of rain.’

The weather; she was talking about the weather.

Embarrassed by her own banality, she lapsed into silence before trying a more direct approach. ‘So, how are you feeling, Dex?’

‘Bit rough.’

‘No, I mean about last night? Me and you.’

He glanced at her and wondered what he was expected to say. He was wary of a confrontation with no immediate means of escape, save hurling himself from the mountainside. ‘I feel fine! How about you? How are you feeling about last night?’

‘Fine. Bit embarrassed, I s’pose, harking on like that, you know, ’bout the future. Changing the world, and all that. Bit corny in the harsh light of day. Must have sounded corny anyway, specially to someone with no principles or ideals —’

‘Hey, I have ideals!’

‘Sleeping with two women at the same time is not an ideal.’

‘Well, you *say* that. .’

She tutted. ‘You can be really seedy sometimes, d’you know that?’

‘I can’t help it.’

‘Well you should try.’ She grabbed a handful of heather and tossed it limply towards him. ‘You’re much nicer when you do. Anyway. The point is, I didn’t mean to sound such a drip.’

‘You didn’t. It was interesting. And like I said, I had a really nice time. It’s just a shame the timing’s not better.’

He was giving her an annoying little consolatory smile

and she wrinkled her nose in irritation. ‘What, you mean otherwise we’d be *boy*friend and *girl*friend?’

‘I don’t know. Who knows?’

He held out his hand, palm upwards, and she looked at it for a moment with distaste, then sighed and took it resignedly, and they sat there, their hands linked uselessly, feeling idiotic until their arms got tired and they both let go. The best solution, he decided, was to feign sleep until it was time to go, and with this in mind he removed his jacket, padded it into a pillow and closed his eyes against the sun. His body ached, the alcohol pulsed in his head, and he began to feel himself slipping into unconsciousness, when she spoke.

‘Can I say something? Just to put your mind at rest?’

Groggily he opened his eyes. She was sitting with her legs raised to her chest, arms wrapped round them, chin resting on her knees. ‘Go on.’

She inhaled, as if gathering her thoughts, then spoke.

‘I don’t want you thinking that I’m bothered or anything. I mean, what happened last night, I know it was only ’cause you were drunk. .’

‘Emma. .’

‘Let me finish, will you? But I had a really nice time anyway. I’ve not done a lot of. . that kind of thing. I’ve not made a study of it, not like you, but it was nice. I think you’re nice, Dex, when you want to be. And maybe it’s just bad timing or whatever, but I think you should head off to China or India or wherever and find yourself, and I’ll get on quite happily with things here. I don’t want to come with you, I

don't want weekly postcards, I don't even want your phone number. I don't want to get married and have your babies either, or even have another fling. We had one really, really nice night together, that's all. I'll always remember it. And if we bump into each other sometime in the future at a party or something, then that's fine too. We'll just have a friendly chat. We won't be embarrassed 'cause you've had your hand down my top and there'll be no awkwardness and we'll be, whatever, "cool" about it, alright? Me and you. We'll just be. . friends. Agreed?'

'Alright. Agreed.'

'Right, that's that then. Now—' She reached for her rucksack and fumbled around inside, producing a battered Pentax SLR.

'What are you doing?'

'What does it look like? Taking a photo. Something to remember you by.'

'I look terrible,' he said, already adjusting his hair.

'Don't give me that, you love it. .'

He lit a cigarette for a prop. 'What do you want a photo for?'

'For when you're famous.' She was balancing the camera on a boulder now, framing the shot through the viewfinder. 'I want to be able to say to my kids, see him there, he once stuck his hand up Mummy's skirt in a crowded room.'

'You started it!'

'No, you started it, pal!' She cocked the clockwork timer, scrubbed at her own hair with her fingertips, while

Dexter set the cigarette in one side of his mouth and then the other. ‘Right — thirty seconds.’

Dexter refined his pose. ‘What do we say? “Cheese”?’

‘Not “cheese”. Let’s say “one-night stand!”’ She pressed the button and the camera began to whirr. ‘Or “promiscuous!”’ She clambered over the rocks.

‘Or “thieves that pass in the night”.’

‘Thieves don’t pass in the night. That’s ships.’

‘What do thieves do?’

‘Thieves are thick.’

‘What’s wrong with just “cheese”?’

‘Let’s not say anything. Let’s just smile, look natural. Look young and full of high ideals and hope or something. Ready?’

‘Ready.’

‘Okay then, smile and. .’

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE. The Third Anniversary

Last Summer

SUNDAY 15 JULY 2007

Edinburgh

'Ring-ring. Ring-ring.'

He is woken by his daughter's index finger pressing his nose as if it were a doorbell.

'Ring-ring. Ring-ring. Who's at the door? Jasmine's at the door!!'

'What are you doing, Jas?'

'I'm waking you up. Ring-ring.' Her thumb is in his eye now, pulling back the eyelid. 'Wake up, lazybones!'

'What time is it?'

'Daytime!'

Beside him in the hotel bed, Maddy reaches for her watch. 'Half past six,' she groans into the pillow and Jasmine laughs malevolently. Dexter opens both eyes, and sees her face on the pillow next to him, her nose inches away. 'Haven't you got books to read or dolls to play with or something?'

'Nope.'

'Go and colour something in, will you?'

'I'm hungry. Can we have room service? What time is the swimming pool open?'

The Edinburgh hotel is plush, traditional and grand, oak panels and porcelain baths. His parents stayed here once, for his graduation, and it's a little more old-fashioned and expensive than he would like, but he thought that if they're going to do this, they should do it in some style. They are staying for two nights — Dexter, Maddy and Jasmine — before hiring a car and driving across to a holiday cottage near Loch Lomond. Glasgow is nearer of course, but Dexter hasn't been to Edinburgh for fifteen years, not since a debauched weekend when he presented a TV show from the Festival. All of that seems a long, long time ago now, another lifetime. Today he has a fatherly notion that he might show his daughter round the city. Maddy, aware of the date, has decided to leave them to it.

'You're sure you don't mind?' he asks her in the privacy of the bathroom.

'Of course not. I'll go to the gallery, see that exhibition.'

'I just want to show her some places. Memory Lane. No reason why you should suffer too.'

'Like I said, I really don't mind.'

He regards her carefully. 'And you don't think I'm nuts?'

She gives a faint smile. 'No, I don't think you're nuts.'

'You don't think it's ghoulish or weird?'

'Not at all.' If she does mind, she certainly isn't showing it. He kisses her lightly on the neck. 'You must do whatever you want,' she says.

The notion that it might rain for forty consecutive days had once seemed far-fetched, but not this year. All over the country it has poured daily for weeks now, high streets

disappearing under flood water, and the summer has seemed so unique that it might almost be a new kind of season. A monsoon season, but as they step out onto the street, the day is still bright with high cloud, dry for the moment at least. They make plans for lunch with Maddy, and go their separate ways.

The hotel is in the Old Town, just off the Royal Mile, and Dexter takes Jasmine on the standard atmospheric tour, down alleyways and secret stairways until they find themselves on Nicolson Street, heading south out of the city centre. He remembers the street as hectic and hazy with bus fumes, but on a Sunday morning it is quiet and a little sad, and Jasmine is starting to get restless and bored now that they have left the tourist trail. Feeling her hand go heavy in his, Dexter keeps on walking. He has found the old address on one of Emma's letters and soon spots a sign. Rankeillor Street. They turn into the quiet residential road.

'Where are we going?'

'I'm looking for somewhere. Number seventeen.' They are outside now. Dexter peers up at the third-floor window, its curtains drawn, blank and nondescript.

'You see that flat there? That's where Emma used to live when we were at University together. In fact that's sort of where we met.' Jasmine looks up obediently, but there is nothing to distinguish the unremarkable terraced house from those on either side, and Dexter starts to question the wisdom of this expedition. It's indulgent, morbid and sentimental; what was he expecting to find? There is nothing here that he recalls, and the pleasure gained from

nostalgia is slight and futile. For a moment he contemplates abandoning the tour, phoning Maddy and arranging to meet a little earlier, but Jasmine is pointing to the end of the street, the granite escarpment that looms incongruously over the estate below.

'What's that?'

'It's Salisbury Crags. Leads up to Arthur's Seat.'

'There's people up there!'

'You can climb it. It isn't hard. What do you think? Shall we try? Do you think you can do it?'

They head for Holyrood Park. Depressingly, his seven-and-a-half-year-old daughter clambers up the mountain path with far more energy than her father, pausing only intermittently to turn back and laugh at him, wheezing and sweating below.

'It's because I've got no grip on my shoes,' he protests, and they keep climbing, leaving the main path and clambering over rocks before finally stumbling onto the scrubby rust-coloured plateau at the top of Arthur's Seat. There they find the stone column that marks the highest point, and he inspects the scratchings and scribbles, half hoping to see his own initials there: 'Fight Faschism' 'Alex M 5/5/07' 'Fiona 4ever'.

To distract Jasmine from the lewder graffiti, he lifts her up and sits her on the column, one arm round her waist, her legs dangling as he points out the landmarks. 'That's the castle, near the hotel. There's the station. That's the Firth of Forth, leading out into the North Sea. Norway's over there somewhere. Leith, and that's the New Town, where I used

to live. Twenty years ago now, Jas. Last century. And over there, with the tower, that's Calton Hill. We could climb that too, if you liked, this afternoon.'

'Aren't you too tired?' she asks, sardonically.

'Me? You're kidding. I'm a natural athlete.' Jasmine wheezes in imitation, one fist clutching at her chest. 'Comedian.' He lifts her off the pillar, hands tucked in her armpits, and makes to throw her off the mountainside before swinging her, screaming and laughing, under his arm.

They walk a little way from the summit and find a natural hollow nearby that overlooks the city. He lies with his hands behind his head, while Jasmine sits beside him eating salt and vinegar crisps and drinking her carton of juice with great concentration. The sun is warm on his face, but the early start to the day is starting to take its toll and within minutes he feels sleep creeping up on him.

'Did Emma come here too?' asks Jasmine.

Dexter opens his eyes and raises himself up onto his elbows.

'She did. We came here together. I've got a photo of us at home. I'll show you. Back when Dad was skinny.'

Jasmine puffs her cheeks out at him, then sets about licking the salt from her fingers. 'Do you miss her?'

'Who? Emma? Of course. Every day. She was my best friend.' He nudges her with his elbow. 'Why, do you?'

Jasmine frowns as she recalls. 'I think so. I was only four, I don't remember her that well, only when I look at pictures. I remember the wedding. She was nice though,

wasn't she?'

'Very nice.'

'So who's your best friend now?'

He places a hand on the back of his daughter's neck, fitting his thumb into the hollow there. 'You, of course. Why, who's your best friend?'

Her forehead creases in serious thought. 'I think it's probably Phoebe,' she says, then sucks on the straw of her empty juice carton so that it gurgles rudely.

'You can go off people you know,' he says, and she laughs with the straw pinched between her lips. 'Come here,' he growls, making a grab and pulling her backwards so that she lies in the crook of his arm, her head on his shoulder. In a moment she is still and Dexter closes his eyes once again and feels the warmth of the mid-morning sun on his eyelids.

'Beautiful day,' he mumbles, 'No rain today. Not yet,' and once again sleep starts to creep up on him. He can smell the hotel shampoo on Jasmine's hair, feel her breath on his neck, salt and vinegar, slow and regular, as he drifts off into slumber.

He is unconscious for perhaps two minutes before her bony elbows are jabbing into his chest.

'Dad? I'm bored. Can we go now, please?'

Emma and Dexter spent the rest of that afternoon on the hillside laughing and talking, offering up information about themselves: what their parents did, how many siblings they had, telling favoured anecdotes. In the middle of the afternoon, as if by mutual agreement, they both fell

asleep, lying chastely in parallel until at five Dexter woke with a start, and they gathered together the empty bottles and the remains of the picnic and started to head woozily down the hill towards the city and home.

As they approached the park exit, Emma became aware that they would soon be saying goodbye, and that there was every chance that they would never see each other again. There might be parties, she supposed, but they both knew a different crowd, and besides he would be off travelling soon. Even if they did see each other it would be fleeting and formal, and he would soon forget everything that had happened in that small rented room in the early hours of the morning. As they stumbled down the hill she began to feel regret creeping up on her, and realised she didn't want him to go yet. A second night. She wanted one more night at least, so that they could finish what they had started. How might she say that? She couldn't of course. Fainthearted as usual, she had left it too late. In the future, I'll be braver, she told herself. In the future, I will always speak my mind, eloquently, passionately. They were at the park gates now, the place where she should probably say goodbye.

She kicked at the gravel footpath and scratched her head. 'Well, I suppose I'd better. .'

Dexter took her by the hand. 'So, listen. Why don't you come for a drink?'

She instructed her features to show no delight. 'What, now?'

'Or at least walk back with me?'

‘Aren’t your mum and dad coming round?’

‘Not ’til this evening. It’s only half-five.’

He was rubbing the knuckle of her forefinger with his thumb. She made a pretence of making a decision. ‘Go on then,’ she shrugged, indifferent, and he let go of her hand and started walking.

As they crossed the railway at North Bridge and passed into the Georgian New Town, a plan was forming in his head. He would get home by six, immediately call his parents at their hotel and arrange to meet them at the restaurant at eight rather than at the flat at six-thirty. This would give him nearly two whole hours. Callum would be with his girlfriend, they’d have the flat to themselves for two whole hours, and he would be able to kiss her again. The high-ceilinged white-walled rooms were empty save for his suitcases and a few pieces of furniture, the mattress in his bedroom, the old chaise-longue. A couple of dust-sheets and it would look like the set of a Russian play. He knew enough about Emma to know that she would be a sucker for that, and he would almost certainly be able to kiss her, even sober. Whatever happened between them in the future, whatever rows and repercussions loomed, he knew that he very much wanted to kiss her now. The walk would take another fifteen minutes. He found himself slightly breathless. They should have got a cab.

Perhaps she had the same idea because they really were walking very fast as they headed down the steep incline of Dundas Street, their elbows occasionally brushing against each other, the Forth hazy in the distance. After all

these years she was still elated by the sight of the iron-blue river in between the terraces of fine Georgian houses. 'I might have known you'd live round here,' she said, disapproving but envious, and as she spoke she found herself short of breath. She was going back to his well-appointed flat, they were going to do it, and she was embarrassed to find her neck flushing pink in anticipation. She ran her tongue over her teeth, attempting an ineffectual polish. Did she need to brush her teeth? Champagne always made her breath smell. Should they stop for chewing gum? Or condoms, would Dexter have condoms? Of course he would; it was like asking if he had shoes. But should she brush her teeth or should she just throw herself at him as the door closed? She tried to recall what underwear she was wearing, then remembered that it was her special mountain-climbing underwear. Too late to worry about that; they had turned into Fettes Row.

'Not far now,' he said and smiled, and she smiled too, and laughed, reaching for his hand, acknowledging what was about to happen. They were almost running now. He said he lived at number thirty-five, and she found herself counting down in her head. Seventy-five, seventy-three, seventy-one. Nearly there. Her chest was tightening, she felt sick. Forty-seven, forty-five, forty-three. There was a stitch in her side and an electric tingle in her fingertips and now he was pulling on her hand and they were both laughing as they ran down the street. A car horn blared. Ignore it, keep going, whatever happens do not stop.

But a woman's voice was calling 'Dexter! Dexter!' and

all the hope fell out of her. It felt like running into a wall.

Dexter's father's Jaguar was parked opposite number thirty-five, and his mother was stepping from the car and waving at him from across the street. He had never imagined that he could be less pleased to see his parents.

'There you are! We've been waiting for you!'

Emma noticed how Dexter dropped her hand, almost throwing it away from him as he crossed the street and embraced his mother. With a further spasm of irritation she noticed that Mrs Mayhew was extremely beautiful and stylishly dressed, the father less so, a tall, sombre, dishevelled man, clearly unhappy to have been kept waiting. The mother met Emma's eyes over her son's shoulder and gave an indulgent, consolatory smile, almost as if she knew. It was the look a duchess might give, finding her errant son kissing the housemaid.

After that, things happened faster than Dexter would have liked. Remembering the faked phone-call, he realised that he was bound to be caught in a lie unless he got them into the flat as quickly as possible, but his father was asking about parking, his mother wondering where he had *been* all day, and why he hadn't called, while Emma stood a little way off to one side, still the housemaid, deferential and superfluous, wondering how soon she could accept defeat and head home.

'I thought we told you, we'd be coming here at six—'

'Six-thirty actually.'

'I left a message this morning on your machine—'

'Mum, Dad — this is my friend Emma!'

‘Are you sure that I can park here?’ said his father.

‘Pleased to meet you, Emma. Alison. You’ve caught the sun. Where have you two been all day?’

‘—because if I get a parking ticket, Dexter—’

Dexter turned to Emma, eyes blazing an apology. ‘So, do you want to come in for a drink?’

‘Or dinner?’ said Alison. ‘Why don’t you join us for dinner?’

Emma glanced at Dexter, who seemed wild-eyed with what she took to be shock at the idea. Or was it encouragement? Either way, she would say no. These people seemed nice enough, but it wasn’t what she wanted, gate-crashing someone else’s family occasion. They would be going somewhere swanky and she looked like a lumberjack and besides, really, what was the point? Sitting there gazing at Dexter while they asked what her parents did for a living, where she went to school. Already she could feel herself shrinking from this family’s brash self-confidence, their showy affection for each other, their money and style and grace. She would become shy or, worse, drunk and neither would help her chances. Best give up. She managed a smile. ‘Actually, I better head back.’

‘Are you sure?’ said Dexter, frowning now.

‘Yeah, stuff to do. You go on. I’ll see you around, maybe.’

‘Oh. Okay,’ he said, disappointed. If she had wanted to come in she could have, but ‘*see you around, maybe*’? He wondered if perhaps she wasn’t that bothered about him after all. There was a silence. His father wandered off to

peer at the parking meter once more.

Emma raised her hand. ‘Bye then.’

‘See you.’

She turned to Alison. ‘Nice to meet you.’

‘And you, Emily.’

‘Emma.’

‘Of course. Emma. Goodbye, Emma.’

‘And—’ She shrugged towards Dexter while his mother spectated. ‘Well, have a nice life, I suppose.’

‘And you. Have a nice life.’

She turned and started to walk away. The Mayhew family watched her go.

‘Dexter, I’m sorry — did we interrupt something?’

‘No. Not at all. Emma’s just a friend.’

Smiling to herself, Alison Mayhew regarded her handsome son intently, then reached out and took the lapels of his suit in both hands, tugging them gently to settle the jacket on his shoulders.

‘Dexter — weren’t you wearing this yesterday?’

* * *

And so Emma Morley walked home in the evening light, trailing her disappointment behind her. The day was cooling off now, and she shivered as she felt something in the air, an unexpected shudder of anxiety that ran the length of her spine, and was so intense as to make her stop walking for a moment. Fear of the future, she thought. She found herself at the imposing junction of George Street and Hanover Street as all around her people hurried home from work or out to meet friends or lovers, all with a sense of

purpose and direction. And here she was, twenty-two and clueless and sloping back to a dingy flat, defeated once again.

'What are you going to do with your life?' In one way or another it seemed that people had been asking her this forever; teachers, her parents, friends at three in the morning, but the question had never seemed this pressing and still she was no nearer an answer. The future rose up ahead of her, a succession of empty days, each more daunting and unknowable than the one before her. How would she ever fill them all?

She began walking again, south towards The Mound. 'Live each day as if it's your last', that was the conventional advice, but really, who had the energy for that? What if it rained or you felt a bit glandy? It just wasn't practical. Better by far to simply try and be good and courageous and bold and to make a difference. Not change the world exactly, but the bit around you. Go out there with your passion and your electric typewriter and work hard at. . something. Change lives through art maybe. Cherish your friends, stay true to your principles, live passionately and fully and well. Experience new things. Love and be loved, if you ever get the chance.

That was her general theory, even if she hadn't made a very good start of it. With little more than a shrug she had said goodbye to someone she really liked, the first boy she had ever really cared for, and now she would have to accept the fact that she would probably never see him again. She had no phone number, no address, and even if

she did, what was the point? He hadn't asked for her number either, and she was too proud to be just another moony girl leaving unwanted messages. *Have a nice life* had been her last line. Was that really the best she could come up with?

She walked on. The castle was just coming into view when she heard the footsteps, the soles of smart shoes slapping hard onto the pavement behind, and even before she heard her name and turned she was smiling, because she knew that it would be him.

'I thought I'd lost you!' he said, slowing to a walk, red-faced and breathless, attempting to regain some nonchalance.

'No, I'm here.'

'Sorry about that.'

'No, really, it's fine.'

He stood with his hands on his knees, catching his breath. 'I wasn't expecting my parents 'til later, and then they turned up out of the blue, and I got distracted, and I suddenly realised. . bear with me. . I realised I didn't have any way to get in touch with you.'

'Oh. Okay.'

'So — look. I don't have a pen. Do you have a pen? You must have.'

She crouched and rooted in her rucksack amongst the litter of their picnic. *Find a pen, please have a pen, you must have a pen. .*

'Hurrah! A pen!'

'Hurrah'? You shouted 'hurrah!', you idiot. Stay calm. Don't blow it now.

She rooted in her wallet for a scrap of paper, found a supermarket receipt, and handed it over, then dictated her number, her parents' number in Leeds, their address and her own address in Edinburgh with special emphasis on the correct postcode, and in return he wrote down his.

'This is me.' He handed her the precious scrap of paper. 'Call me or I'll call you, but one of us will call, yes? What I mean is it's not a competition. You don't lose if you phone first.'

'I understand.'

'I'm away in France until August, but then I'm back and I thought you might want to come down and stay maybe?'

'Stay with *you*?'

'Not for ever. For a weekend. At mine. My parents', I mean. Only if you want to.'

'Oh. Okay. Yes. Okay. Yes. Yes. Okay. Yes.'

'So. I should get back. Are you sure you don't want to come for a drink or something? Or dinner?'

'I don't think I should,' she said.

'No, I don't think you should either.' He looked relieved and she felt slighted once again. Why not? she thought. Was he embarrassed by her?

'Oh. Right. Why's that?'

'Because I think if you did I'd go a bit mad. With frustration, I mean. You sitting there. Because I wouldn't be able to do what I want to do.'

'Why? What do you want to do?' she asked, though

she knew the answer. He put one hand lightly on the back of her neck, and simultaneously she placed one hand lightly on his hip, and they kissed in the street as all around them people hurried home in the summer light, and it was the sweetest kiss that either of them would ever know.

This is where it all begins. Everything starts here, today.

And then it was over. ‘So. I’ll see you around,’ he said, walking slowly backwards away from her.

‘I hope so,’ she smiled.

‘And I hope so too. Bye, Em.’

‘Bye, Dex.’

‘Goodbye.’

‘Goodbye. Goodbye.’

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